

THE BLIND IN INDIA

BY

CAPTAIN H. J. M. DESAI, M.A., LL.B.

Hon. Secretary,

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND,
(INDIA)

AND

Hon. Secretary,

THE N. S. D. INDUSTRIAL HOME FOR THE BLIND,
WORLI, BOMBAY.



Published by

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND
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The David Sassoon Institution

Bombay

and

Principal,

The Victoria Memorial School for the Blind,

Tardeo, Bombay,

Who taught me to love and serve the blind.

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FOREWORD

Blind Welfare Services in India are yet in their infancy. Though magnificent pioneering work has been done by the existing schools, institutions and associations for the blind, much yet remains to be done.

A band of devoted workers have given their very best to the Cause. And yet an army of volunteers is needed to tackle the problem of the 2,000,000 blind in India adequately.

A friend, who had assisted in the collection of funds, told me after completion of her work that her mission was over. This gave me a clue to the need of explaining the complexity and the magnitude of a colossal problem in a small booklet.

The figures in this booklet have been mainly borrowed from the Government of India Report on Blindness, 1944. The booklet does not claim to be exhaustive but aims at putting before the readers the problem of the blind in India in a nutshell.

If this little booklet inspires even a few volunteers to work with missionary zeal for the amelioration of the sad lot of the blind in India, or even a few of the suggestions contained herein are taken up by the Union or the State Governments, the author shall deem himself amply rewarded.

Bombay, 15th July 1954.

H. J. M. DESAI.

THE BLIND IN INDIA

I. A COLOSSAL PROBLEM

Like all other Social Problems in India, the Problem of the Blind is one of colossal magnitude. The 1951 Census figures estimate the population of India at 361.82 million. The average density of the population is 241 per square mile. The vast sub-continent of India is peopled by a majority of the socially and the economically handicapped. The underprivileged castes, popularly known as the scheduled castes and the primitive tribes, known as the scheduled tribes account for 67.6 million of the population. The I.L.O. estimated the landless labour in India at 68 million. The 2 million blind, 2 lakh deaf mutes, 1 million mentally ill and 14 lakh beggars represent a section of the handicapped. Partition of India aggravated the problem, necessitating the rehabilitation and resettlement of 12 million refugees from Pakistan.

POVERTY

The national per capita income was estimated at Rs. 114 per annum in 1942-43. Though it has shown an increase in the recent years, it barely suffices for subsistence standards. The average life expectancy in India is 27 years as compared to 67 years in the U.S.A. Approximately 88 per cent of the population was estimated to be illiterate. Adequate facilities do not exist for the free and compulsory education of even the sighted children of school going age.

APPRAISAL

Any appraisal of the progress made by Blind Welfare Services in India will have to take account of the appalling poverty and the magnitude of other Social Welfare Problems in the country. Blind Welfare forms an integral part of any Social Welfare Movement in the country. For obvious reasons, it cannot be pursued in isolation. Progress must therefore necessarily be slow.

GOVERNMENT ALIVE TO THE PROBLEM

The State has accepted responsibility for Social Welfare of the people. The Directive Principles of State Policy enumerated in Part IV of the Constitution of India lays down as follows:

“The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life.”

The ideal of a Welfare State has been accepted. Under the magnificent leadership of our beloved and revered Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, a great humanist, considerable progress has been made for the upliftment of the socially and economically backward sections of the community. The Five Year Plan lays great emphasis on raising the standard of living of the masses.

THE CENTRAL SOCIAL WELFARE BOARD

To implement the Directive Principle of State Policy enunciated above as also the recommendations in the Five Year Plan, the Government of India set up the Central Social Welfare Board with a view to providing assistance, guidance and help to voluntary social welfare organisations in the country. This Board is an autonomous body with eminent social workers on its different Panels. The four Advisory Panels in (i) Child Welfare, (ii) Women's Service, (iii) Panel dealing with the Physically Handicapped, Juvenile Delinquents and Correctional Administration and (iv) Family Welfare Panel are all manned by Experts in their specialised fields. The functions of the Board include a survey and assessment of the needs and requirements of social welfare organisations in the country, evaluation of their programmes and co-ordination of assistance under the Ministries of the Central and the State Governments. Recently Social Welfare Boards have also been set up in the States. The task of assisting, guiding and co-ordinating the activities of

over 10,000 known institutions and organisations with different programmes of social welfare is no easy one. The Board has already done commendable work and has distributed grants aggregating Rs. 20,21,000; 91 institutions for the Handicapped and the Delinquents getting Rs. 3,02,400/-. Though only the fringe of the problem has been touched, the Board holds out promise of tackling the Problem of Social Welfare in a scientific and planned way.

SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The People of India have solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens Justice, Social, Economic, Political, Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, Equality of Status and opportunity and to promote among them all Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the Unity of the Nation. The Handicapped and the Blind must get Equality of Status and opportunity. With this end in view, a great effort must be made from now on to assure the visually handicapped that their fundamental rights are secure and that they will have a fair opportunity to educate and rehabilitate themselves.

II. ASCERTAINMENT

We have made an appraisal of the magnitude of all Social Problems in India. We have also seen how the appalling poverty restricts all progress. We now proceed to evaluate the magnitude of the Problem of the 2,000,000 Blind in India.

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF BLIND

Statistics regarding the Blind, collected in the Census of 1931, remain the latest authentic statistical survey in India. Obviously, after a lapse of 23 long years, the figures do not present an accurate picture nor are they useful in any scientific planning. These figures give a ratio of 172 blind persons per 1,00,000 of the population. The figures have been arrived at on a general definition amounting to total blindness. It is assumed that for every totally blind person, there is at least one partially blind in need of blind welfare services. Specific counts in certain districts have shown that the ratio of the blind per 1,00,000 of the population is 233.42 in Bengal, 260 in Bombay and as much as 900 in the United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh. The Census returns are inaccurate as there is a tendency to suppress facts regarding blindness, especially of unmarried girls. Taking this as well as the ratio revealed by the sample surveys, the Government of India Report on Blindness, 1944 has come to the conclusion that 250 per one lakh represents the probable ratio of the totally blind, with a similar ratio of partially blind in need of welfare services; giving a total figure of 500 per 1,00,000 of the population; thus giving a blind population of 2,000,000. Since this estimate, the country was partitioned and Pakistan formed as a separate sovereign State. As the population of India increases at the rate of 4,000,000 every year and as the previous figures are generally believed to be an underestimate, a population of 2,000,000 blind is accepted even now after the partition.

INCIDENCE OF BLINDNESS

With the possible exception of Egypt, the incidence of Blindness is the heaviest in India. Whereas the number of

blind per 1,00,000 of the population is as low as 43 in Belgium, 57 in Bulgaria and Italy, 60 in Germany, 102 in France, 150 in Canada and 175 in the U.K. and the U.S.A., it is as high as 500 in India. This incidence is all the more alarming because a majority of the blind in India lose their vision in childhood whereas a large majority of the blind in the West lose their vision in old age.

REPORT ON BLINDNESS IN INDIA

The Government of India has been alive to the magnitude of the Problem of the Blind in India and as early as 1943, January, they appointed an Expert of the eminence of Lt. Col. Sir Clutha Mackenzie "as a Special Officer to investigate the extent of Blindness in India and its cause and to carry out a survey of the existing societies for the education of the blind children and of the means of employing trained blind men and women in sheltered industries and to prepare a scheme for the creation of a National Organisation for the Blind of India." This appointment was possible with the co-operation of the St. Dunstan's whose representative Sir Clutha was in India at that time, exploring the possibilities of starting a Training Centre for the War Blinded in India. India was indeed fortunate in having the services of this expert on Blind Welfare. The Joint Committee appointed by the Central Advisory Board of Health and the Central Advisory Board of Education, of which Sir Clutha was the Secretary, has produced an excellent 'Report on Blindness in India', which to date, remains the most authentic survey of the problem in the country. This is the latest and the most exhaustive document containing a Plan for the organisation of Blind Welfare Services in India as well as for planning Prevention of Blindness. Given the requisite finances and with a well organised Publicity and Propaganda campaign, much can be achieved in implementing the recommendations made in the Report.

REGISTRATION OF THE BLIND

Scientific planning requires the collection of accurate and reliable statistical data. Registration all over India can be

undertaken only at Governmental level. The existing Revenue Machinery can undertake this work without much additional staff. The earlier this work is undertaken, the earlier the pace of planning can be accelerated.

NEED OF COMPILING STATISTICS

Blind Welfare Services could be planned on scientific lines only if reliable and accurate statistical data is available. Unless the age groups of the blind population are known, planning becomes very difficult. The need for additional institutions for particular areas cannot be assessed in the absence of statistical data. Priorities cannot be determined vis-a-vis the requirements of other areas. It seems therefore essential to set up an organisation for collection of reliable statistics on which future planning can be based.

PROGRESS IN THE WEST

In the following pages, I have quoted figures of achievements in the West. In view of the poverty of the teeming millions in India and the magnitude of other social welfare problems, equally or more pressing, a comparison seems unjustified. Yet I have given the figures so as to emphasise what all is possible to do to ameliorate the condition of the blind. The figures amply illustrate the marvellous achievements of the blind and underline the fact that given an opportunity in life, the visually handicapped too can lead independent, self respecting and useful lives as contributive members of the society.

III. PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS

“There is no branch of medical science in which comparatively cheap and speedy treatment yields such quick, satisfactory and lasting results. Whether we study the balance sheet from the angle of true charity to suffering humanity, or from that of its economic value to the community, there is no field of work more worth while”. So emphasises the Report on Blindness in India, 1944, referred to already. Though splendid work in this field has already been done both by the Government and by private initiative, much yet remains to be done. The greatest possible emphasis must always be laid on prevention of blindness for the simple reason that money spent on prevention is much less than that required for maintaining life long services for all age groups of the blind.

COMMON CAUSES

The same Report gives the following as the major factors in the causation of blindness:

1. Inflammatory diseases of the conjunctiva and cornea due, among other causes, to the effects of irritants applied in ignorance to the eye.
2. Cataract and Glaucoma.
3. Malnutrition.
4. Venereal diseases.
5. Smallpox.
6. Pernicious activities of couchers and quacks.
7. The ill effects of bad posture, glare, bad lighting and badly printed books.

FINANCE

With adequate finances and well staffed and equipped medical services, these major factors in the causation of blindness can be eliminated. The poverty of the masses and especially of the villagers and the low standard of nutrition has mainly

aggravated the problem. Diet deficiency diseases are very common and lead to night blindness. The country has only 1 Doctor and 1 Nurse for every 6300 and 4300 persons respectively. The per capita expenditure on health is As. 5 Pies 9 only. Whereas in the U.S.A., there are 10.28 hospital beds per 1000 of the population, in India there is 0.24 of a bed per 1,000 of the population. Famine and epidemics are very common and malnutrition saps the vitality of the people and lowers their resistance power to diseases. An attack on poverty, disease and malnutrition and a simultaneous effort to raise the general standard of living as is now being attempted will surely decrease the incidence of blindness but the greatest vigilance and energetic and speedy action are essential to achieve the desired results.

MOBILE OPHTHALMIC UNITS

The major cities have fine Ophthalmic Hospitals and very eminent Ophthalmologists carrying on private practice. The District Civil Hospitals too have an Ophthalmic Ward attached to it. India's population is predominantly rural and nearly 85 per cent live in the villages. The vast distances and lack of adequate and cheap transport does not encourage the villager to go to long distances for treatment which would be effective immediately after the disease has been detected. It therefore becomes imperative to take the treatment to the doors of the villager and with this end in view, the Report on Blindness in India, 1944 recommended the institution of Mobile Ophthalmic Units. These Units established in the State of Bombay, have achieved wonderful results. Encouraged by these results, the National Association for the Blind resolved to move the Union Ministry of Health to ask all the State Governments to set up similar Units. We are glad that the Ministry of Health has recommended this suggestion to the State Governments for implementation.

CARE OF EYES

Intensive propaganda by means of posters, leaflets, exhibitions, films, demonstrations etc. are essential to educate the

masses in the Care of the Eyes. Such propaganda can effectively be carried out in all primary and secondary schools.

SCOPE FOR CHARITY

All over India, there is a vast field for Charity to alleviate unnecessary human suffering. Ophthalmic Hospitals, Eye Wards and Dispensaries and Mobile Units can be multiplied with great advantage to the public. Latest and upto date equipment can also make the existing services more effective and useful.

PREVENTION BETTER THAN CURE

No affliction can be considered worse than permanent blindness. Though these brave people suffer their lot in silence and with the utmost fortitude and try and lead as normal a life as possible, all necessary steps must be taken to eliminate blindness. In India, nearly 90 per cent of blindness is estimated to be preventable and another five percent curable. What an amount of unnecessary human suffering? Suffering—perhaps for a life time—which simple effective remedies, if taken in time, would have eliminated altogether. Instances of persons who, by an operation, would have had their vision restored, and who have sought admission to Blind Schools are not uncommon. A preliminary examination before the student is admitted to the Blind School reveals the necessity of an operation and the student goes home with his vision restored instead of leading a life long existence as a blind individual.

IV. THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

In June 1948, some social workers connected with Blind Welfare Institutions in Bombay State convened the First Provincial Conference for the Blind. The Conference was inaugurated by the Hon'ble Mr. B. G. Kher, then Prime Minister of Bombay and was presided over by Bombay's popular Health Minister, the Hon'ble Dr. M. D. D. Gilder. The Conference passed several important resolutions pertaining to prevention of preventable and the cure of curable blindness and to the education, employment, after care and welfare of the blind. These resolutions were forwarded to all the State Governments as well as the Union Government and resulted in a lot of good. Encouraged by these results, the workers resolved to evolve an All India Body which can effectively work in India on the same lines as the Royal National Institute for the Blind worked in the U.K. and the American Foundation for the Blind worked in the U.S.A.

ALL INDIA CONFERENCE FOR THE BLIND

The All India Conference for the Blind was accordingly convened in January, 1952. This was the First All India Conference for the Blind and delegates and observers from all over India mustered strong at this Conference to give birth to the National Association for the Blind. In addition to the usual Resolutions, some of which have, incidentally been implemented by some of the States resulting into great good to the blind, the Conference adopted the main resolution regarding the formation of the NAB.

RESOLUTION

The Hon'ble Mr. B. G. Kher, who presided over the Conference, moved the following Resolution from the Chair:

"This Conference resolves that an Association for the Blind, the workers for the blind and the sympathisers of the blind of India be formed to be called the National Association for the Blind, with its head office in Bombay, to work in the whole of India for the prevention of preventable and the cure

of curable blindness and the welfare of the blind, to bring about a co-operation among the various organisations for the blind, to co-ordinate their activities, to organise and start new organisations and institutions for various activities for the welfare of the blind and to do all such other things as may be necessary for the promotion of the interests of the blind”.

The Resolution was carried unanimously. Today, in just over a couple of years of its existence, the NAB has set up two Branches, one at Calcutta for West Bengal and the other at Madras. It has some 24 institutions affiliated to it.

POLICY MATTERS

Till such time as the NAB can put its finances in order, it has to concentrate on moving the Union and the State Governments to better the lot of the visually handicapped. The NAB has repeatedly pressed the necessity of implementing the major recommendations of the Government of India Report on Blindness as also the recommendations incorporated in the Resolutions passed at the All India Conference for the Blind. It has started a Holiday & Convalescent Home for the Blind at Poona. It also intends to start a quarterly magazine for the Blind. It attempts, within the meagre financial resources available, to give publicity to the cause of the 2,000,000 blind in the country. It guides individual persons regarding their difficulties. Even the Director of Education, Bombay State sought its advice on setting up two new Blind Schools in the State and has enquired whether the NAB can take over two existing State run Blind Schools.

PLANNING BLIND WELFARE

The NAB plans to work for a Blind Persons Act which can promote blind welfare work throughout the country. It also aims at preparing a scheme for incorporation in the Second Five Year Plan. The latest Plan on which work can straight away be started is the one recommended in the Report on Blindness in India, 1944. It is adequate if the recommendations contained therein are implemented energetically.

FINANCE

An overall Plan, spread over a period of five years, would require at least Rs. five crores to set up Pilot Projects in the important States. Such a Plan should cover provision for all age groups of the blind as also for blind with other Handicaps.

VIGOUROUS MOTTO

With its vigourous Motto **SERVE THE BLIND**, the NAB promises to do all it can to usher in a new era of **LIGHT & JOY** for the 2,000,000 visually handicapped in India. It is fortunate in having, as its first President, an eminent Braillist and one loved and admired by the Blind, Mr. R. M. Alpaiwala, Bar-at-Law, himself visually handicapped.

ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

The National Association for the Blind can effectively serve a large population of the blind scattered all over India only if it succeeds in building up a Service of Volunteers who can devote some of their spare time in working for the blind. Ample opportunities await such volunteers. A vast field still remains unexplored. It is essential for volunteers to study what all has been done for the visually handicapped in the progressive countries. There is absolutely no reason why the same achievements cannot be had in India. All that is required is continuous work in a co-operative and selfless missionary spirit. We have people who are ready to do their mite. For lack of adequate propaganda and publicity, these persons do not know how best to utilise their spare moments. It is essential to harness these volunteers in the service of the handicapped.

V. EDUCATION OF THE BLIND

Education of the sighted has been recognised as a State Responsibility all over the world. Why then should their less fortunate visually handicapped brethren be denied the blessings of education? As a matter of fact, their very handicap entitles them to greater facilities for education and training. Yet the evolution of the system of education of the blind shows that this right has not always been easily recognised and very few countries have sincerely implemented this principle. If primary education for the sighted is free and compulsory, in equity, it should be free and compulsory for the handicapped.

EARLY EFFORTS IN INDIA

The Blind have been with us since eternity. How then have they been able to pull on in India in the absence of adequate Blind Welfare Services as we understand them now? The reply is simple. In India, the Joint Family system ensures a tolerably good existence for the handicapped. The milk of human kindness and charity flows abundantly and it is considered a religious duty to give alms to the handicapped and the poor and the needy. These two systems of Joint Family and Charity have ensured a tolerably good existence but no self respecting person, whether visually handicapped or not, would like to eke out such an existence by depending on the kindness of others. This urge as well as the impact with western civilisation brought about a change. The missionaries were the first to bring home the advantages of schools for training the blind.

FIRST SCHOOL

The first school was founded by Miss Annie Sharp in Amritsar in 1887. In 1905 it moved to Rajpur, Dehra Dun, where it still continues to do excellent work. It is now known as the Sharp Memorial School. It was followed three years later by the Church Missionary School at Palamcottah. Begun by Miss A. J. Askwith, the Institution is today one of the finest of its kind in India. In 1897, the late Mr. Lal Bihari Shah founded the Calcutta Blind School, a school notable for its splendid achievements. In 1898 was opened a school at Ranchi,

followed by one in Mysore in 1901. The Dadar School for Blind Girls was started in 1900, followed two years later by the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind. Both these institutions in Bombay have a splendid record of service to the blind.

INADEQUACY

The Government of India Report on Blindness, 1944, gives a list of 32 Schools and Homes accommodating 1,212 blind of both the sexes. This gives a negligible percentage of 0.06 getting the benefit of education on modern and scientific lines. Fifty Years of Work for the Blind in India, issued by the Government of India in Commemoration of the Centenary of the Death of Louis Braille mentions that the numbers of institutions have risen to fifty catering to the needs of 1,500 blind children and adults of both the sexes. The All India Conference for the Blind Booklet has appended a Directory naming 79 blind schools, institutions and organisations spread all over India. For a population of 2,000,000 scattered over this vast sub-continent, the number of institutions are entirely inadequate. Not all of them have modern apparatus and equipment and most of them do not teach beyond the primary stage and few vocational subjects. All have to transcribe their requirements of Braille Books by hand; the only Government Central Braille Printing Press turning out books in Hindi and in a few regional languages.

TYPES OF SCHOOLS

Of the 32 schools listed in the Government of India Report on Blindness, 1944, 24 are schools for the blind, 5 for the deaf mutes as well as the blind, 1 is in combination with a poor asylum and 2 are departments of missionary establishments. 21 are managed by Societies for the Welfare of the Blind, five by Missions, five by the State Governments and 1 by a private individual.

NURSERY SCHOOLS OR SUNSHINE HOMES FOR BLIND BABIES

These are conspicuous by their absence in India. No specialised Nursery Schools or Sunshine Homes for blind

babies of the types which exist in the west have yet been started. This is mainly because the well to do will not send their babies to such institutions and the poor exploit them for the purposes of begging. Some of the existing schools do admit children under seven but there is no organised training on Montessori lines. Due to the prevalence of 'Babies sore eyes' or ophthalmia neonatorum, blindness in the first five years of life forms the main nucleus of the blind population in India. The need for such Nursery Schools or Sunshine Homes is therefore very pressing.

THE PRIMARY, JUNIORS, SENIORS, AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

In India, most of the schools for the blind have primary and secondary departments combined. These schools also impart vocational training. The syllabus mainly corresponds to that adopted by the normal schools for the sighted. These courses do not lead to any diplomas or certificate examination in most cases. Some of the schools award certificates indicating proficiency attained in the various subjects taught.

HIGH SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

No separate institutions of the type available in the west exist. Some of the schools send their promising blind to the nearest High Schools for the sighted. Individual blind have, despite many difficulties, achieved great success and have graduated in Arts, Law etc. Though their achievements are praiseworthy, these are rare examples, mostly from families who could afford such expensive education necessitating the employment of readers.

SCHOOLS FOR THE PARTIALLY SIGHTED

No such institutions exist in India though the ratio of the partially sighted is estimated to be equal to that of the totally blind, viz 250 per population of 1,00,000.

SCHOOLS FOR THE DOUBLY HANDICAPPED, DEFECTIVES, MENTALLY RETARDED, ETC.

No such schools or institutions exist for the mentally retarded children. Some of the existing blind schools admit the blind with other handicaps but no specialised arrangements exist for their training. Five of the schools are for the Deaf Mutes and the Blind. The Lucknow School for the Deaf and the Blind is an exceptionally well organised institution. These pioneer efforts, meagre though they are, fill a gap and many more such institutions are required.

COMMERCIAL SCHOOLS

No such separate schools for the blind exist. In the west, hundreds of blind are employed as stenographers, typists etc. This avenue of employment can only open up if there are well conducted courses imparting commercial education to blind who have attained the requisite state of proficiency in general education.

CO-EDUCATION OF THE BLIND AND THE SIGHTED

In view of the many advantages of this system, and especially in view of its comparative low cost, the National Association for the Blind recommended the experiment to the Union and the Bombay Governments. The suggestion was to make provision for such co-education in at least one selected school in each district; a specially trained teacher with knowledge of braille and psychology of the blind being attached to such schools. The suggestion was not accepted. This system has the added advantage of not segregating the blind from the sighted. It would be almost impossible for centuries to come to make adequate provision for training a majority of the 2,000,000 Blind in India and the cheapest and the most practicable course seems to encourage the education of the blind with the sighted, making provision in such selected institutions of trained teachers with knowledge of the psychology of the blind and also of braille.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

This department is the strongest in India and practically all schools for the blind have provision for imparting elementary vocational training. The customary trades of cane work, basketry, handloom weaving, tape making, making of string bags, carpentry, book-binding, sisal hemp work, bead work, matting, wool rug making, making of carpets etc. are taught in different institutions with various degrees of efficiency. Even this work requires to be placed on a more scientific footing by providing for definite syllabus and courses and awarding certificates or diplomas on conclusion of the courses. Speed tests are very essential and the ultimate object of all training should be to attain commercial proficiency. This is not being done now with the result that settlement in life later becomes extremely difficult and the training and education imparted over a number of years do not lead to the goal of congenial and remunerative employment.

REHABILITATION OF THE NEWLY BLIND

No such specialised institutions exist in India. In the absence of these, the newly blind individual losing his vision at an advanced age is not trained to adjust to his new life of darkness. He therefore develops certain fears and complexes which are difficult to eradicate. The only alternative for him is to go to a Home for the adult blind and to learn for himself how to adjust to his new life of darkness. This lack of rehabilitation makes things difficult and puts avoidable strain on the already handicapped person.

TRAINING CENTRES FOR THE ADULT BLIND

These are also very few and inadequate for the large adult blind population. The best institution of its kind is the Training Centre for Adult Blind at Dehra Dun. This Centre was started after the St. Dunstan's Hostel for the War Blinded completed its objective of training all war blinded soldiers. The Centre conducts regular courses of two years duration and awards a certificate to those passing out successfully. Among other institutions of this kind must be mentioned the N. S. D. Industrial

Home for the Blind, the inmates of which earned over Rs. 40,000/- last year from cane work, carpentry, handloom weaving and music. The Schools for the Blind, Palamcottah and Poonamallee are other notable institutions outstanding in this field.

EDUCATION OF BLIND GIRLS AND ADULT FEMALES

The reader must have observed that the training facilities for males enumerated above are very meagre and inadequate. Facilities for the education of blind girls and the training of adult females are still less and not even the fringe of the problem has been touched in these fields of social work. The female is an economic unit in India. The average and the poorer sections for the community, expect a wife to cook, to do the household chores, to wash the linen, clean the utensils and keep the house tidy. The general belief is that the blind cannot perform these duties and hence no attempts are made to train them for such work. Because of this difficulty, no one would come forward to marry a blind girl. No attempts are made to educate and train blind girls and females so that they can earn a self respecting livelihood. The plight of the female blind in India is therefore extremely difficult. Denied the gift of precious vision, she is also denied the facilities of normal education and training capable of making her a normal housewife. This problem requires the most urgent attention of all social workers, especially ladies, who would understand the problems of their visually handicapped sisters much better.

TRAINING APPARATUS AND APPLIANCES

No workshops exist in the whole of India for manufacturing apparatus and appliances used in the education and training of the blind. Such apparatus and appliances have to be imported from the Royal National Institute for the Blind, U.K. or the American Foundation for Overseas Blind Inc. Though these Institutions have, for decades, been supplying these apparatus and appliances at cost price, still taking into account freight and forwarding charges and customs duty, they are costly for the average blind in India, who generally belong to the poorest

section of the community. It may be remembered that Customs Duty is exempted only on tangible equipment and apparatus imported by recognised institutions and not those imported by the individual blind.

TRAINING THE STAFF AND SIGHTED SOCIAL WORKERS

One of the most important things to which India can pay attention is the imperative need of training the existing staff of the Blind Schools, Institutions and Organisations as also training the sighted social worker who volunteers to work for the Cause. Unfortunately, the existing staff is not fully trained and no facilities exist for such scientific training. Though attempts have been made by the Calcutta Blind School, the Schools for the Blind, Palamcottah and the Victoria Memorial School for the Blind to conduct such courses, they cover only a small area and due to language and other difficulties are not fully intensive.

In recent years, the Government of India have deputed a few selected Heads of Institutions to foreign countries as U.N.O. Fellows for intensive observation of the work done in the West. These studies have helped to improve matters but the awards are few and far between and many more such Fellowships are necessary before substantial progress could be achieved. Besides these Fellowships are not given to Volunteers. The general feelings of the volunteers is that their duties begin and end with the collection of funds. These ideas could be easily eradicated if they are made to realise what a vast field of work for the blind still remains unexplored in India and how much more can be done for ameliorating the lot of the blind.

The imperative necessity therefore is to train the staff as well as the volunteers. Short interesting courses could be organised and certificates or diplomas awarded. This should be given the top priority in any planning done in the future years.

SCHOOL FOR MUSIC

In India, the possibilities of turning out the blind as professional musicians are great and a well thought out scheme would ensure excellent results in the shortest possible time. The Orchestra of the N. S. D. Industrial Home for the Blind at Bombay, developed in the last three years, knows well over 250 popular film tunes and innumerable classical tunes. It is invited by the Municipality for performing at Public Parks and Gardens and by Clubs, Hotels and at private functions. It performed at over 96 functions last year and earned about Rs. 12,000. In a tour of 20 days to the capital, Delhi, they made more than Rs. 5,000/- net.

A well organised School of Music is an imperative necessity. The trained musicians can be absorbed as Music Teachers in Municipal and other schools. They can also take in private tuitions and earn a decent living.

WHAT ALL REMAINS TO BE DONE

This Chapter has not been written with a view to deprecate the excellent and pioneering work done by the existing institutions despite the most insurmountable difficulties experienced by them in view of the meagre financial resources. It has been written with the sole object of emphasising what all still remains to be done. The lacunae are obvious to any student of Blind Welfare and if progress is to be ensured, self deception and complacency are to be set aside and the facts faced. Progress is possible only where there is realisation of our shortcomings. Both the Government and the Charitable Public has a great role to play. One of the directive principle of the Constitution of India emphasises as under:

“The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.”

Note the words "all children". It does not say only the sighted children. If the States are really anxious to carry out this directive, they must make a beginning now. It is encouraging to note that the State of Bombay has made provision in the current year's budget for starting two Schools for the Blind, one at Nasik and the other at Hubli. Except for the loss of vision, the blind are normal persons. Their tastes, abilities, etc. differ as those of the sighted. They must therefore have a choice of selecting a line to their liking and then to get intensive training to build up their future careers.

HOME VISITORS SERVICE

In a country where ignorance and poverty are so very much rampant, it is futile to expect the backward masses to seek out institutions and to avail of their services. It seems essential to organise a Service of Home Visitors who may go to the residences of the visually handicapped and guide them or their parents in the essentials of daily life. Ladies, or preferably fully trained nurses, who have gone through a short course in Blind Welfare can guide the families regarding the Health of the visually handicapped child and direct the parents to send them to the nearest suitable institutions. Similarly the adult blind can be helped with training, raw materials or marketing of their goods. Great scope exists for such work.

VI. BRAILLE AND BRAILLE PRESSES

The evolution of a common Braille Code for the whole of India was a most difficult and complicated task. The sub-continent of India has many different languages using divergent scripts. Since the first school started in 1887, efforts were made to adapt Braille for the language used. 'Fifty Years of Work for the Blind in India' issued by the Government of India in Commemoration of the Centenary of the Death of Louis Braille names the following ten principal Braille Codes used till recently:

1. Sheriff Braille.
2. Indian Braille of Dr. Nilkanthrai Chatrapati.
3. Tamil Braille of Miss Askwith.
4. Mysore and Kannada Code.
5. Chatterjee Code.
6. Oriental Braille by Rev. J. Knowles and Mr. L. Garthwaite.
7. Shah Braille.
8. Sindhi Braille of Mr. P. M. Advani.
9. Uniform Indian Braille framed by the Expert Braille Committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education.
10. Standard Indian Braille framed by an informal Committee under the Chairmanship of Lt. Col. Sir Clutha Mackenzie.

The First Provincial Conference for the Blind, which met in Bombay in June 1948, pressed for a Uniform Braille for all Indian languages based on the similarity of sounds of the signs in the International Braille. The Government of India thereupon requested the UNESCO to explore the possibilities of a World Braille. UNESCO warmly responded to the suggestion

and appointed an Advisory Committee which met in Paris in 1949. The Advisory Committee came to the conclusion that the evolution of a single Braille script was both desirable and practicable. Again, the UNESCO convened an International Braille Conference in Paris in March 1950 which recommended that the proposed single Braille script should be known as 'World Braille.' The policy in the main was that each sign was to be used for the same or nearly the same sound as in the original Braille and to represent the same letter and mark and to fulfill the same or similar function.

BHARATI BRAILLE

On the advice of the Expert Braille Committee, the Government of India accepted the recommendations of the International Braille Conference and evolved a Code which was named 'Bharati Braille.' Much credit for this achievement goes to Lt. Col. Sir Clutha Mackenzie to whom the blind in India owe a deep debt of gratitude not only for his untiring efforts to evolve a uniform World Braille but also for the excellent Report on Blindness in India, 1944, of which he was the chief architect.

BRAILLE PRESSES

Till very recently, all Braille books required by the Blind Schools were transcribed by hand by the senior pupils in the schools. This process was very slow and restricted progress. But due to the diversity of languages and Braille Codes used till recently, a Central Press could not be set up earlier. The Government of India has now set up a Central Braille Printing Press at Dehra Dun. Unfortunately it has restricted its activities to the printing of Hindi text books only with the result that books in most of the regional languages are still not available, and require to be hand transcribed. Till this lacunae is filled, progress in the education of the blind is bound to be slow.

NEED FOR ADDITIONAL BRAILLE PRESSES

There is an imperative need to set up additional Braille Presses at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta to serve the need of

the regional languages. The sooner such presses are set up, the better. The Central Press at Dehra Dun also would do well to step up production of Braille Books. In the west, lakhs of volumes of popular books have been transcribed in Braille and are available on the easiest of terms to the blind. In India still, we have not been able to supply even the most elementary text books required for primary and secondary Departments of Blind Schools. We should face the facts and do everything possible to remove this great handicap in the education and the recreation of the Blind. Magazines and Music Notations should also be available to the Blind at very cheap cost.

VII. LIBRARIES

Unless we have well organised Braille Presses, it is useless to talk about setting up Braille Libraries. The Central Braille Printing Press has been established only a couple of years ago and apart from printing a dozen Hindi Text books, it has not achieved anything substantial to hold out great promise. Besides, till such time as Hindi is established throughout the country, it is necessary to bring out books in the regional languages in which training is imparted in all the Blind Schools.

PROGRESS IN THE WEST

During the year 1952-53, the Royal National Institute for the Blind, U. K. produced 44,445 volumes of literature, 1968 volumes of music, 27,106 literature pamphlets, 7,520 music pamphlets, 380,355 newspapers and 133,417 magazines all in Braille. This is exclusive of production in Moon type. The Students Braille Library has well over 20,000 volumes. Braille Radio Times, the Braille periodical with the largest circulation—4,570 copies a week—gives the visually handicapped a complete summary of all programmes broadcast by the B.B.C.

In France, the Bibliotheque Braille has well over 1,55,000 general books and 20,000 musicals. They are for all age groups and even for specialists.

TALKING BOOKS & TAPE RECORDERS

Unfortunately, these are not at all available to the Blind in India. As media of instruction, they have great educative value. Specially devised gramophones play records at controlled speeds. They greatly help in dispelling the monotony of blindness. The 'listening readers' find it much easy to learn things this way and mass production of these talking books is likely to revolutionise education of the blind.

VOLUNTARY BRAILLE WRITERS

As already pointed out, the problem of producing Braille text and other books in India is extremely difficult. In the absence of adequate number of Braille Printing Presses in regional languages, text books are even required to be hand

transcribed. This is a slow process and necessarily holds up progress. No efforts have yet been made to start an organisation of sighted voluntary workers who may be trained in Braille so that they can transcribe books in their spare time. Till such time as adequate Braille Presses are set up, this seems to be the only workable solution and India would do well to set up such Societies of Volunteers as early as possible.

BRAILLE MUSIC

The system of Notations is not very common in Indian Classical and Light Music. Braille is therefore not used for Music Notations as is vastly practiced in the west. The need for such notations is not much felt in schools or institutions which have trained music teachers but such notations are likely to prove a great boon to individual blind studying music on their own.

SOLID DOT BRAILLE

A recent invention which is likely to revolutionise the writing of Braille is the Solid Dot Printing Machine. Research and exhaustive tests in this process are going on and the system is likely to be perfected soon. In view of the numerous languages in which Braille is required to be produced in India in small quantities, this machine promises to be the most suitable and every possibility should be explored to introduce it on as large a scale as possible.

DEEPAK

In India, two blind brothers, twins, publish an excellent magazine in Braille. Most of the Blind Schools and Institutions are also publishing their own magazines. These are hand transcribed. Praiseworthy as these pioneer efforts are, they need to be greatly intensified so as to provide intellectual fare to the visually handicapped.

A HOPE

Braille Printing and Libraries in Braille are two of the most neglected items in the Blind Welfare Services in India. It is to be hoped that in the greater interest of our visually handicapped, this lacunae will soon be removed and adequate provision made for all age groups and all tastes.

VIII. EMPLOYMENT OF THE BLIND

All education must lead to congenial and remunerative employment. Education of the Blind is no exception. Education of the Blind is more expensive than that of the sighted. If, therefore, money spent by the State or by the Charitable Public for the education of the Blind over a number of years is to yield the desired results, provision must exist for the absorption of the blind in suitable posts.

PRE-REQUISITES

If Employment of the Blind has to be successful, training for the particular career must be thorough. Any normal employer would expect his employees to fully earn their wages. In commercial concerns, jobs cannot be doled out on the basis of charity or altruism. It is essential that the output of the blind must be as much as, if not more than that of the sighted. He should seek no other privileges or concessions. He must be regular and punctual in his attendance. Only then would he inspire confidence and pave the way for the absorption of his visually handicapped brethren. This necessitates thorough training.

PROGRESS IN THE WEST

The Report of the Royal National Institute for the Blind for 1952-53 gives amazing figures regarding the employment of the blind. As many as 10,116 blind are employed in congenial occupations. 3138 are employed in Sheltered Workshops for the Blind, 1399 are Home Workers and 5579 are absorbed in Open Industries. Factory workers of various kind number 1058. As many as 531 blind are working as telephone operators while 321 are working as Shorthand Typists. 337 work as unskilled labourers and 146 are doing agricultural work.

When it is remembered that the Blind population in the U.K. is barely one twentieth of what we have in India, the progress is amazing. It is true that the shortage of Man Power created by the two Great World Wars, especially the last one, in

both of which the United Kingdom was an active participant, greatly accelerated the pace of Employment of the Blind, but yet it clearly reveals a well planned and well organised system of Employment & Placement which India can emulate with great advantage.

The United States of America has over 14,000 blind employed. About 2500 of these are employed in factories. Canada, which has an estimated blind population of only 18,200, employs as many as 3870; while Germany employs about 5,000. A study of the relevant statistics reveal a variety of careers which the Blind can pursue successfully.

DIFFICULTIES IN INDIA

The difficulties faced in India in the solution of the Problem of the Employment of the Blind cannot be underestimated. It is the most difficult and heartbreaking task. Firstly, the country has surplus man power and the problem of the employment of the sighted and the able bodied itself presents great difficulties. In the last two or three years, unemployment has been on the increase. When experienced able bodied sighted employees are available in large numbers, naturally the employers cannot be expected to consider the claims of the handicapped favourably. Secondly, due to lack of adequate propaganda and publicity, the sighted public in India has not been sufficiently educated to the possibilities of the blind both for fully economic production in factories and offices and for occupations in sheltered workshops. Though in the latter field some progress has been made, in the former it is negligible. Thirdly, the education and training of the blind has not been planned keeping in view the ultimate goal of fixing up trained blind in remunerative jobs. The training facilities available for pursuing different careers are very inadequate and limited. The common belief that the blind cannot be independent earning members of the community requires to be eradicated. There is colossal ignorance even amongst the sympathisers and well wishers of the blind.

A BEGINNING MADE

The National Association for the Blind has set up a Committee for the Employment & Placement of the Blind. Though this Committee started functioning only a year back, it has succeeded in fixing up about fourteen blind so far. In the absence of funds, the Committee could not engage a full time Employment & Placement Officer and hence work has to be done by Honorary Workers. This further restricts progress. Of the fourteen employed, about six are fixed up in Textile Mills in Bombay as Bobbin Cleaners and Folders of Cloth as also as Bardan (Gunny Bales) Stitchers. One, who partially regained his sight after operations has been fixed up as a peon. Another has been fixed up as a Music teacher in a school while yet another has been fixed up as a Senior Braille teacher. A couple of them have been fixed up as Masseurs in Government Hospitals. The rest have been fixed up in Institutions for the Blind. Small as this beginning is, it holds out hope for progress in this direction.

DIVERSITY OF CAREERS NEEDED

The common belief is that all blind are alike. This is a highly mistaken notion. The Blind differ from one another as much as the sighted do. Besides, the degree of vision varies. There are the blind with other handicaps. Health, intellectual abilities and tastes also differ widely. Some have been born blind whereas others have become blind late in life. All these and other factors are very relevant. It is essential to have as wide a range of careers as possible.

MAIN FIELDS OF EMPLOYMENT

The Government of India Report on Blindness, 1944 lists the following six main fields of employment:

1. The Sheltered Workshops: In these, trained blind work on such occupations as cane work, basketry, brush making, mattress making, handloom weaving, tape making, book binding, toy making etc.

2. Independent Occupations: As lawyers, professors, teachers, journalists, musicians, masseurs, insurance agents, salesmen, telephone operators, shorthand typists etc.
3. Home Workers: These persons work at home, selecting any of the crafts in which they have specialised in Schools for the Blind. The articles manufactured by them are marketed through some Central Organisation.
4. Open Industries: These are simple repetitive operations in factories, mills and other concerns employing skilled and unskilled workers. This avenue has great possibilities as is illustrated by the figures of employment in the United Kingdom.
5. Organised Vending Stands: Selling newspapers, tobacco, sweets etc.
6. Staff in Blind Welfare Schools & Organisations: As teachers, supervisors, salesmen, braille printers and binders, domestic servants etc.

SHELTERED WORKSHOPS

Till such time as an atmosphere is created for absorption of the blind in open industries by educating the employers on the possibilities of the blind working on commercial lines, the Sheltered Workshops remain the best media of employment. In India, there are a number of Industrial Training Institutions for the Blind which partly work as Workshops. But as their main function is training, they cannot be classed as Workshops on Commercial lines. It is encouraging to note that a move is afoot to start such a Workshop run exclusively on commercial lines at Bombay and a sum of Rupees seven lakhs has been collected for the purpose. A Sheltered Workshop has also been started at the Training Centre for Adult Blind, Dehra Dun. If Blind Welfare has to achieve its ultimate goal of fixing up trained blind in congenial and remunerative employment, there should be a net work of such Workshops spread all over the country.

INDEPENDENT OCCUPATIONS

Quite a few gifted blind have already made their mark in different fields. One of the Members of Parliament is totally blind. Others have been successfully practicing as lawyers, insurance agents, professors and teachers, masseurs and salesmen. But the number is limited. For the intellectual blind, this seems to be the best avenue and every possible step should be taken to encourage promising blind to pursue careers of their liking.

HOME WORKERS

This has not been introduced in India on any organised lines. Due to the vastness of the country and the fact that the blind are spread out in thousands of small and inaccessible villages, Home Teaching and Home Workers scheme is difficult of implementation in India. The delivery of raw materials and the collecting and marketing of finished products will not make the scheme an economic success. Yet, a few trained blind do work at Home and earn a decent livelihood but as stated above, no organised scheme has yet been launched in India.

OPEN INDUSTRIES

This field of employment has the best possibilities. It is amazing on what diverse jobs the blind could be employed. Assembly, bag lugging, bench drilling, blue print machine operating, book stacking, capstan lathe operating, deburring, fettling, fly press operating, glass cutting, inspection, lampshade binding, lapping machine operating, milling, packing, power press operating, rethreading bolts, riveting, rope splicing, wire splicing etc. are some of the occupations on which the blind have been known to be working successfully. The question is one of inspiring confidence in the employers. The National Association for the Blind has been alive to this problem and offers to employers trained blind who could be taken up as apprentices for a month or two, their pay to commence only if the employers are satisfied that their output is as much as that of the average sighted worker.

STAFF IN BLIND SCHOOLS AND WELFARE ORGANISATIONS

This has absorbed quite a large number of blind in India. The essential point which ought to be borne in mind is that such employment should be purely on the basis of merit and not out of altruism so that the training of the blind which is of vital importance may not suffer.

EMPLOYABLE BLIND

Generally, the employable blind can be classified into (i) those who are capable of fully economic production in factories and offices and competent to follow professions which bring them an independent livelihood and (ii) those who because of their handicap are not capable of fully economic employment and whose income requires to be subsidised. Those at (i) above are generally pursuing Independent Occupations or are employed in Open Industries. Those in category (ii) above require to be subsidised to maintain a minimum standard of subsistence. Unfortunately, in India, we have no such social security schemes which subsidise the earnings of those who, on account of their disablement, are not capable of fully economic earnings.

COMMERCIAL EMPLOYMENT

The report of the Working Party on the Employment of Blind Persons in U.K., 1951, mentions that Government Departments were employing 63 shorthand typists and 16 typists who work from recording machines. 17 shorthand typists are employed by the local authorities and about 80 are employed in business and professional offices in England and Wales. The blind use a specially devised portable machine which records shorthand notes on paper tapes. The machines are so designed that they may be operated quietly and at high speeds. Obviously, copy typing is not possible. But almost all Government offices employ shorthand typists who take down dictation and type. It should, therefore, be perfectly possible for the Government to give a lead in the employment of the visually handicapped shorthand typists. Thorough training should precede such employment.

TELEPHONE OPERATORS

The report mentioned in the preceding para states that on the 1st April 1950, there were 125 blind telephonists in Government Departments. The first telephone operator in the U.K. was employed over half a century ago. We have yet to make a beginning. The blind telephonists cannot be employed on switchboards where the signals are made by means of flashing lights nor where multi position boards are used. Where signals are given by means of doll's eye and drop shutter indicators, the blind can easily operate relying on touch and sound to detect the drop of the indicator. Besides the switchboards are adapted by fitting stud supervisorys. The blind operator also takes down messages in Braille and transmits them and maintains a log of calls made. Thorough training makes them as efficient as the sighted operators.

THE NEED FOR LEGISLATION

The pace of the employment of the blind can be accelerated if the requisite legislation is passed making it incumbent on factories employing 20 or more persons to take in a quota of the disabled and the handicapped including the blind. It will be recalled that as a result of the Tomlinson Committee's recommendations, the British Parliament passed The Disabled Persons (Employment) Act, 1944. This enabled the Minister of Labour and National Service to provide training and to assist in providing improved employment facilities for the disabled, including the blind. Under this Act, the Minister takes the financial responsibility for training the blind over the age of 21 years. In addition, he contributes towards the cost of the employment provided in Workshops for the Blind.

AN EFFICIENT EMPLOYMENT AND PLACEMENT SERVICE NEEDED

The greatest contribution which the National Association for the Blind can make to accelerate the pace of progress of the employment of the visually handicapped is to organise an efficient Employment & Placement Service. This would

necessitate the employment of full time and fully trained Placement Officers. Their job should be to contact employers, see which of the simple repetitive jobs in their factories could be conveniently done by the blind, to recommend the blind suitable for the job, to follow up their work and see whether they attend regularly and give satisfaction to their employers. Such services could well be organised in a few selected industrial towns. The more blind are encouraged and helped to earn a fully economic independent living, the lesser is the strain on Blind Welfare Services providing them a life long shelter and other services. It therefore becomes imperative to provide facilities for making the blind contributive members of the society.

APPEAL TO INDUSTRIALISTS

The problem of the employment of the blind can be solved only with the understanding and the goodwill of the employers and particularly the industrialists employing large staff in factories. To them we make it clear that we do not want them to employ any handicapped person if he does not give full value for the wages paid to him. Only if employers are satisfied, after trying the blind over a period of one or two months, that the blind are capable of the same output as the sighted on simple repetitive jobs and do not seek any other special privileges or concessions, do we appeal to them to give an opportunity to the visually handicapped to prove their worth.

OUR OFFER

Such of the employers as are willing to consider the employment of the blind can inform us of their requirements. We will assist them in determining what simple repetitive jobs would suit the blind. We offer to send the blind as apprentices for a month or two. If the employers are fully satisfied with their work, attendance etc., we would appeal to them to pay them the same wages as paid to sighted workers doing similar work. We undertake to ensure that the blind attend regularly and punctually and do their work to the entire satisfaction of the employers.

IX. THE AGED AND THE INFIRM BLIND

Even when everything is done for the education and employment of the able blind, there will always remain a group of the aged and the infirm and disabled blind who are in need of special care. Any efficient system of blind welfare should embrace all age groups of the blind and should also provide for the blind with other handicaps. Though some of the existing institutions admit the aged blind, no separate institutions for the care of the aged blind exist in India. As we have in our midst quite a large number of aged and infirm blind, such institutions appear necessary.

PASTIME OCCUPATIONS AND PENSIONS

It seems essential to provide pastime light occupations for the aged and infirm blind in specially run institutions. Where such institutions do not exist, a suitable pension to ensure a minimum standard of subsistence should be granted by the State. Such provisions will go a long way in eliminating the evil of begging.

STATE RESPONSIBILITY

Provision for the aged, the disabled and the infirm blind must necessarily remain a State responsibility. The huge sums which are given away in alms or in indiscriminate charities should be harnessed for the good of the aged and the infirm handicapped. As, by their very nature, Homes for the aged or the infirm blind will not be self-supporting and will require to be subsidised heavily, charitable organisations do not venture on such institutions. All the same, their need is imperative. It is this section of the blind which is in need of the greatest care and affection and the earlier such Homes are set up or schemes drawn up for giving old age pensions, the better for this large number of suffering humanity.

X. SOCIAL STATUS OF THE BLIND

In India, for generations, the blind have eked out a miserable existence by begging or by depending on charity. The objective should now be changed to enable blind men and women to take their rightful place in the community. Everything possible should be done to ensure that those who can work are given an opportunity to do so and are provided with the physical, psychological and technical means for restoring their confidence in ability to work and capacity to earn a livelihood in the occupation for which each individual is best suited. The plan should also ensure to all blind persons the means of entering fully into the social and cultural life of the community. Much importance was attached to such a resolution passed at the International Conference of Workers for the Blind, held at Merton College, Oxford, in August 1949.

SEGREGATION TO BE AVOIDED

The present system of institutional education in India tends to segregate the blind from their sighted brethren. After all, the blind have to live in a world of the sighted and such segregation does a lot of harm to the blind in their later life. Every possible opportunity should therefore be afforded to the blind to mix with the sighted. Society should readily accept them and make them feel at home in the company of sighted persons. This necessitates a little study of the psychology of the blind. Pity and sympathy are to be replaced by understanding and practical help.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a rare experience for the average blind in India. It is still rarer for the blind female. This is mainly because society segregates the blind and does not afford them the opportunity to freely mix with the sighted in social circles. Besides, the blind females are not considered fit for marriage as they are supposed to be incapable of performing the numerous household chores. Marriages between the blind are, for obvious reasons, not favoured but then the fortunate sighted of both the sexes are not trained to believe that the blind are normal in every other respect and can prove good husbands or wives.

XI. SPECIAL FACILITIES FOR THE BLIND

Sight normally accounts for 75 to 80 per cent of all impressions which we receive. Blindness, therefore, is a sufficiently crippling handicap. Like normal sighted persons, the blind also suffer from other physical or mental handicaps. Social disabilities and economic handicaps greatly enhance their difficulties in India. Nature has denied the Blind its most precious gift—Vision. Society is not sufficiently alive to their problems and even the facilities of free and compulsory education, normally available to their more fortunate sighted brethren, is denied to the blind. A proper appraisal of their problem and taking steps for the amelioration of their sad lot is the responsibility of the State and the Public. It would therefore not amount to giving any special concessions to the blind if the following facilities are extended to them:

Apparatus and Appliances used by the Blind: The import of these, either by institutions or organisations working for the Welfare of the Blind or by individual blind, should be free of all Customs duty or any other duties levied. An organisation for the manufacturing of such appliances and apparatus should be set up and it should be the responsibility of such an organisation to ensure that equipment required by the blind is made available to them at cheap prices.

Travel Facilities: The Blind should have the facility of travelling on State Railways and other transport systems by paying for one single fare even when accompanied by an escort. This concession should be available to any bonafide blind individual, whether he is a member of any recognised institution or not.

Radio Sets: The educative value of Radio sets for the Blind has been well recognised. Since 1929, when the British Wireless for the Blind Fund was founded, over 1,00,000 sets and relay installations have been supplied to the blind free of charge. Annually, an appeal is broadcast by the B.B.C. on Christmas evening. The Prime Minister or other leaders make

the appeal. The response is marvellous. Worn-out sets are replaced. The newly blind are given sets. 'Learning by ears' is more simple for the Blind and India will do well to start such a service for the visually handicapped. No blind should be required to pay Radio Licence fees.

Postage Facilities: Literature in Braille is bulkier. Most of the countries have recognised this and have given special facilities to the blind. In India also such facilities are given but still there is scope for reduction in the postal charges for Braille literature and freight for the transport of apparatus and appliances.

Recreational Facilities: As the blind are denied recreation which is normally available through the gift of vision, every possible care should be taken to provide adequate recreational facilities to occupy their leisure time.

Pensions and Public Assistance: If begging and dependence on charity is to be eliminated, it is essential to devise a scheme for granting pensions and assistance to (i) those blind who are incapable of full economic earnings and (ii) the aged, infirm and the disabled blind. This principle has been recognised in all progressive countries. The Blind Persons Act, 1920 passed by the British Parliament, entitled the Blind to receive pensions from the age of fifty. In 1938, this age limit was reduced to forty. It is time that we recognise that the cruel hand of fate has deprived the visually handicapped of their birth right to full economic earnings and it is therefore essential for the State to shoulder this major responsibility and thus help in bringing what little Light and Joy such assistance can bring to the visually handicapped.

Contact with the Sighted World: Institutional training in special schools and homes for the blind isolate the blind in India from the sighted world. The disadvantages of this system have been noticeable for some time past. The National Association for the Blind therefore recommended the Co-edu-

cation of the Blind and the Sighted, provision being made in at least one school in each District to achieve this object. This, unfortunately has not been accepted by the Educational authorities. Till the change is accepted, it seems essential to provide for as many contacts as possible with the sighted world. Voluntary Drives System, inviting the blind at parties and at social functions and giving them ample opportunities for contacts with the sighted world seems very necessary to develop a normal approach so essential for success while one has to live in a world mainly inhabited by the sighted.

XII. LEGISLATION. A BLIND PERSONS ACT.

Legislation has greatly accelerated the pace of progress in Blind Welfare in the West. The American Foundation for the Blind opined that legislation has given the blind "greater assurance of spiritual and cultural and economic well being....has resulted in a great public acceptance of public responsibility for the adequate and dignified rehabilitation of the blind and in greater public recognition of their capacity to make their proper contribution to Society". There is no doubt that legislation has proved to be of inestimable value to the blind. In the U. K., its effect has been to secure training and employment for the younger blind, to remove from blind persons the fear of destitution and to provide general welfare services of wide scope for all.

A BLIND PERSONS ACT FOR INDIA

The Government of India Report on Blindness in India, 1944, has recommended a simple Blind Persons Act containing measures which will pave the way for a comprehensive system which should develop in step with the advance in other social services. It recommends that the measures should include the following:

- (a) To provide the compulsory education of blind children between the ages of 5 and 17 as soon as schools are ready to receive them.
- (b) To prohibit blind children begging or being used for begging purposes.
- (c) To prohibit begging by all blind persons as soon as alternative provisions are available for their maintenance.
- (d) As a first step towards a pension for the blind, the State to provide a subsidy on earnings or an individual allowance to all blind people in regular employment.

- (e) No person or body to establish or conduct any organisation to give blind welfare services without being granted a Licence by Government.
- (f) No person or body to issue an appeal or to collect funds for the blind welfare purposes without being granted a Licence by Government.
- (g) All schools, workshops, hostels, homes or other establishments giving service to the blind to be open to inspection by Government officers and their accounts to be audited and published.

These measures are very moderate. They err on the minimum, bearing in mind the financial stringency. It therefore becomes essential to enact legislation on this minimum programme as early as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

The NAB has recommended the compulsory registration of the Blind as per an approved definition of blindness, the compilation of accurate statistics on blindness, making it obligatory on the Municipalities and Local Authorities to make adequate provision for the care of the infant blind from birth to the age of five and the education of the blind from the age of five till the age of seventeen, making it obligatory for the Labour Department of the States to make adequate provision for the vocational training and employment of all blind above the age of 17 and for the welfare of the unemployable, aged, infirm and disabled blind and for the Health Ministry making adequate provision for the prevention of preventable and cure of curable blindness. Ambitious as this may look, there is no doubt that in course of time, legislation on these lines must be enacted if welfare of the blind is to be ensured.

XIII. SOME FIGURES ON BLINDNESS IN INDIA

1. There are 2,000,000 Blind in India.
2. This constitutes nearly one fifth of the total blind population of the Globe.
3. With the possible exception of Egypt, India has the highest incidence of blindness in the World.
4. The number of totally blind per one lakh of the population is 250, with a similar number of the partially blind in need of Blind Welfare Services, giving a ratio of 500 blind per 100,000 of the population.
5. No machinery for (i) the registration of the Blind or (ii) for the compilation of accurate statistics obtains in India.
6. Nearly ninety per cent of blindness in India is preventable.
7. Another five per cent is curable.
8. On an average, 10,000,000 cases are annually treated at Eye Hospitals, Eye Wards etc. exclusive of the number treated by private ophthalmologists.
9. Over 30 per cent of the blind in India have lost their sight before attaining the age of 21. Most of it is lost in the first five years of life.
10. The four major diseases viz. smallpox, keratomalacia, ophthalmia neonatorum and wrongly treated conjunctivitis are easily preventable.
11. The common causes of blindness in India are (a) inflammatory diseases of the conjunctiva and the cornea, (b) cataract and glaucoma, (c) malnutrition, (d) venereal diseases, (e) small pox, (f) pernicious activities of couchers and quacks and (g) ill effects of bad posture, glare, bad lighting and badly printed books.

12. For the 2,000,000 blind in India, we have only some 50 schools accommodating 1500 boys and girls.
 13. This means that only 0.07 get the benefit of education and care and the rest are left to the mercies of a cruel fate.
 14. A fairly large percentage of the blind are either mentally retarded or deaf or mute or crippled or subnormal and are in need of specialised training and attention. There are no separate institutions for the Blind with other Handicaps.
 15. There are no nursery or kindergarten schools or Sunshine Homes for blind babies, not an adequate number of primary, secondary, commercial or vocational schools for the blind children or rehabilitation centres for the newly blind.
 16. There are no Workshops, run exclusively on commercial lines for employing trained adult blind, no social security or pension schemes for the aged, infirm or disabled blind and no overall plan covering all age groups of the Blind.
 17. There are no Braille Presses for producing books in regional languages.
 18. There are no Libraries for the Blind or the blind students.
 19. There is no plant for producing apparatus and appliances used by the blind.
 20. There is no provision for giving radios, talking books and other similar facilities to the blind.
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XIV. CONCLUSION

None is more appreciative than the author of the magnificent pioneer work done by some 50 Blind Schools, Homes and Institutions and some 30 Associations and Organisations for the Welfare of the Blind in India. These pioneer efforts are all the more laudable as they have been made in the face of ignorance and lack of adequate financial resources. But only by a correct and frank appraisal of all our shortcomings by the standards which modern Blind Welfare Services have come to recognise can we hope to progressively plan our Blind Welfare Services to the great advantage of our visually handicapped. To my mind, a programme based on the following broad principles should be launched early:

1. **Finance:** A great drive to collect funds should be launched. Finance has restricted progress so far. Assistance from International Bodies and the National and the State Governments should be sought.
2. **Publicity and Propaganda:** A mighty State Wide Drive to publicise the Cause should be launched. Great stress should be laid on PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS.
3. **Prevention of Blindness:** The efforts made by the States should be redoubled. New Ophthalmic Hospitals and Eye Wards should be started at all District Headquarters and towns. Mobile Ophthalmic Units should be organised for villages.
4. **Model Institutions:** Every State should have at least one model institution of each type. Thus all States should have nursery or kindergarten schools and sunshine homes for blind babies, primary, secondary and high schools for blind, commercial schools and vocational training institutions for the blind, institutions for the mentally retarded blind and the blind with other handicaps, institutions for the partially blind and schools for training in telephone operating and physiotherapy.

5. **Employment of the Blind:** Every State should have at least one Workshop run purely on commercial lines for the trained blind. Efforts should also be made to absorb blind in open industries.
6. **Braille Presses:** There should be at least three additional Braille Presses at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta to produce Braille literature in regional languages.
7. **Homes for Adult Blind:** All States to make provisions for Homes for adult, aged and infirm blind and for blind with other handicaps.
8. **Legislation:** Legislation should be undertaken immediately to provide for the welfare of the blind.
9. **Training:** Adequate training should be arranged for Blind Welfare Workers as well as the paid staff of the Blind Schools and Institutions. Foreign training would be most beneficial in the long run.

A COLOSSAL PROBLEM

The Problem of the Welfare of the 2,000,000 Blind spread over this sub continent is one of colossal magnitude and complexity. Its solution will require years of patient work by an army of volunteers fired with missionary zeal. Finances will have to be found if the problem has to be adequately tackled. Both the public and the Government will have to be constantly told of the great problem needing their watchful attention and generous help. If unnecessary human suffering has to be eliminated, finances must be found and the earlier funds are found, the better for this sea of suffering humanity.

AN APPEAL

No affliction can be considered worse than permanent blindness. Unless, the blind have the benefit of modern training, their existence becomes much more difficult. By denying them education, training and employment, society makes their lot more difficult. Modern progress has conclusively

proved that the blind, too, can take their rightful place in society as useful and contributive members of the community. It is perfectly possible to achieve in India all that has been achieved in the West. The only restricting factor is the lack of adequate finances.

Why should lack of financial resources alone be permitted to perpetuate the present miserable condition of the blind? Why should 2,000,000 of our own countrymen be allowed to lead a life of darkness, poverty and misery only for lack of funds? And that too in a country where the milk of human kindness flows in such great abundance?

As Helen Keller has put it so beautifully in a small sentence, 'the heaviest burden on the blind is not blindness, but idleness'. The gigantic problem of the blind in India can be solved if we have adequate funds to keep the blind occupied—occupied in learning and thereafter in remunerative jobs. This is possible if we have plenty of funds to organise our Blind Welfare Services on an All India Basis for all age groups of the blind and for all blind with other handicaps.

In all humility and with all the earnestness at my command, I appeal to all generous people to contribute liberally to enable us to set up new institutions in various parts of the country. The more fortunate sighted public and the Government has a duty towards these unfortunate children of darkness. The earlier funds are found, the lesser would be their suffering and quicker would be the pace of their progress.

HELP US LIBERALLY TO HELP THE BLIND.
THANK YOU.

INVOCATION

May the Blessings of God Almighty be on our humble efforts. May He lead us to lead the blind out of darkness to Joy and Happiness in Life. Amen.

Help

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HELP
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TO HELP
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**TO PREVENT PREVENTABLE AND CURE CURABLE
BLINDNESS.**

**IF YOU ARE AN EMPLOYER & WANT TO ENCOURAGE
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Please Consult

Lt. G. L. Nardekar,

Secretary, Employment & Placement

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND,

D. D. Chawl No. 52, Worli.

**IF YOU ARE MAKING A WILL OR DESIRE TO
PERPETUATE THE MEMORY OF A DEAR ONE**

Please Consult

**Mr. K. N. K. Jussawala, B.A., B.T., UNO Fellow,
SECY., NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND,
C/o. The Victoria Memorial School for the Blind,**

Tardeo, Bombay 7.

HELP THE N.A.B. TO HELP & SERVE THE BLIND

THANK YOU.